

**Amendments to the Claims:**

The following listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

1. (Currently Amended) A starter comprising:

a housing;

an output shaft rotatably disposed, ~~said output shaft extending along an axial direction of the output shaft;~~

a plurality of rolling-contact bearings aligned along ~~the~~an axial direction of the output shaft;

a pinion shaft inserted in an inner cylindrical bore of each rolling-contact bearing so as to be supported by said housing via said rolling-contact bearings;

a plain bearing disposed between said output shaft and said pinion shaft so as to rotatably dispose said pinion shaft on said output shaft, and supporting said pinion shaft in cooperation with said rolling-contact bearings such that said pinion shaft is shiftable along the axial direction;

a motor generating a rotational force to rotate said output shaft, said pinion shaft receiving the rotational force from said output shaft and being rotated; and

a pinion gear attached in a cantilever fashion to a distal end of said pinion shaft opposed to said motor, and meshing with a ring gear of an engine in a startup operation to transmit the rotational force of said pinion shaft to said ring gear,

wherein a clearance between said plain bearing and said output shaft is set to be larger than a clearance between said rolling-contact bearings and said pinion shaft.

2. (Original) The starter in accordance with claim 1, wherein said rolling-contact bearings comprise a first rolling-contact bearing and a second rolling-contact bearing

arranged next to each other in the axial direction with a predetermined clearance therebetween.

3. (Previously Presented) The starter in accordance with claim 1, wherein each of said rolling-contact bearings is a ball bearing having balls serving as rolling members.

4. (Canceled)

5. (Previously Presented) The starter in accordance with claim 1, further comprising a one-way clutch coupled around said output shaft via a helical spline of said one-way clutch, and being shiftable on said output shaft in the axial direction together with said pinion shaft, and transmitting a rotational force of said output shaft to said pinion shaft,

wherein an axial end of said rolling-contact bearings on a side of said motor is disposed adjacent to said one-way clutch when said pinion shaft is positioned far from said motor to engage the pinion gear to the ring gear.

6. (Previously Presented) The starter in accordance with claim 1, further comprising a one-way clutch coupled around said output shaft via an internal helical spline of said one-way clutch, being shiftable on said output shaft in the axial direction together with said pinion shaft, and transmitting a rotational force of said output shaft to said pinion shaft,

wherein said internal helical spline of said one-way clutch meshes with an external helical spline of said output shaft to transmit the rotational force of said output shaft to said pinion shaft via said external helical spline and said internal helical spline, and a coupling clearance between said external helical spline and said internal helical spline is larger than a clearance between said rolling-contact bearings and said pinion shaft.

7. (Canceled)

8. (Previously Presented) The starter in accordance with claim 1, wherein a speed reduction device is disposed between said motor and said output shaft to reduce rotation generated in said motor and transmit reduced rotation to said output shaft.

9. (Currently Amended) A starter comprising:

a housing;

an output shaft rotatably disposed, ~~said output shaft extending along an axial direction of the output shaft;~~

a plurality of rolling-contact bearings aligned along ~~the~~an axial direction of the output shaft;

a pinion shaft inserted in an inner cylindrical bore of each rolling contact bearing so as to be supported by said housing via said rolling contact bearings;

a plain bearing disposed between said output shaft and said pinion shaft so as to rotatably dispose said pinion shaft on said output shaft, and supporting said pinion shaft in cooperation with said rolling-contact bearings such that said pinion shaft is shiftable along the axial direction;

a one-way clutch having an internal helical spline coupled with an external helical spline of said output shaft, said one-way clutch being shiftable on said output shaft along the axial direction together with said pinion shaft;

a motor generating a rotational force to rotate said output shaft in response to the rotational force, said pinion shaft receiving the rotational force from said output shaft via said external helical spline and said internal helical spline and being rotated; and

a pinion gear attached in a cantilever fashion to a distal end of said pinion shaft opposed to said motor, and meshing with a ring gear of an engine in a startup operation to transmit the rotational force of said pinion shaft to said ring gear,

wherein a coupling clearance between said external helical spline and said internal helical spline is set to be larger than a clearance between said rolling-contact bearings and said pinion shaft.

10. (Previously Presented) The starter in accordance with claim 9, wherein an axial end of said ball bearing on a side of said motor is disposed adjacent to said one-way clutch when said pinion shaft is positioned far from said motor to engage the pinion gear to the ring gear.

11. (Canceled)

12. (Previously Presented) The starter in accordance with claim 9, wherein a clearance between said plain bearing and said output shaft is larger than the clearance between said rolling-contact bearings and said pinion shaft.

13. (Previously Presented) The starter in accordance with claim 9, wherein a speed reduction device is disposed between said motor and said output shaft to reduce rotation generated in said motor and transmit reduced rotation to said output shaft.

14. (Previously Presented) The starter in accordance with claim 9, wherein each of said rolling-contact bearings is a ball bearing having balls serving as rolling members.